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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000653

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, INR/NESA
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NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: After ousting rebel commander, LTTE reasserts control over Tamil areas in the east

Refs: (A) Oslo 663 (Notal)
- (B) Colombo 628, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In the face of the LTTE's recent offensive, breakaway commander Karuna's forces appear to have totally melted away and, as of April 16, the situation in the east is calm. Karuna's whereabouts remain a mystery. For its part, the GSL military continues to deny reports that it is providing protection to Karuna. The LTTE says one of its senior intelligence operatives named "Neelan" was killed by Karuna's forces before they fled. Neelan was reportedly involved in the 1991 killing of Rajiv Gandhi. The humanitarian situation in the east is improving. At this point, the LTTE, in ousting Karuna, seems to be well on its way to reasserting full control in Tamil areas in the east, thus ending the greatest internal threat it has faced as an organization in years. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) KARUNA'S FORCES MELT AWAY: Breakaway eastern rebel leader Karuna's forces seem to have totally melted away in the face of the April 9-10 offensive launched by the main Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization. As of August 16, the situation in the east is reported to be calm and there are no indications of armed resistance to the main LTTE. Hagrup Haukland, the deputy head of the Norwegian government-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), was quoted in the local press on April 15 as stating that main LTTE was steadily re-establishing control of Tamil areas in the east and that there was no trace of Karuna's once sizable military force left. Haukland also confirmed that the SLMM had resumed its monitoring duties in the areas of Batticaloa and Ampara Districts that had been formerly been under Karuna's control. The monitors were going about their business peacefully and there was no sign that the LTTE's internecine conflict in the region would be renewed.

3. (C) In another sign that normality is returning to the region, eastern representatives of the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE met April 15 for the first time since Karuna's early March split with the Tigers. The meeting took place in Vavunativu town in Batticaloa District, and involved Brigadier V. Wijegunawardene of the Sri Lanka Army (SLA), and Ramesh, a former deputy to Karuna and now the head of LTTE forces in Batticaloa and Ampara. SLMM chief Trond Furohovde also participated in the discussion. The LTTE and the SLA agreed to uphold the February 2002 ceasefire agreement and to re-establish a schedule of regular meetings.

4. (C) REBEL LEADER'S LOCATION UNKNOWN: In the meantime, Karuna's whereabouts remain unknown, with rumors persisting that he is in the custody of the Sri Lankan military. For its part, the military continues to deny that it is providing protection to Karuna or that it is touch with him. Major S. Liwhella, who works in the Sri Lankan military's media unit, told poloff on April 16 that the Sri Lankan military had no knowledge of Karuna's whereabouts, and denied any and all reports that he was under military protection. Unconfirmed rumors continue to swirl that Karuna may have left Sri Lanka to places unknown, but there is no evidence of that. Karuna could also easily be holed up in some jungle hideout in the east.

5. (C) TOP LTTE OFFICIAL REPORTEDLY KILLED: In another related development, the pro-LTTE website "TamilNet" has reported that a high ranking LTTE intelligence operative, "Lt. Col. Neelan," was killed by Karuna's men just before they fled from their positions due to the LTTE offensive. Neelan, who had reportedly been detained by Karuna since early March, seems to have been a big fish in LTTE circles. He was reportedly the deputy to LTTE intelligence head Pottu Amman and the two, along with LTTE head Prabhakaran, are alleged to

have been involved in the plotting of the May 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. In addition to the killing of Neelan, the LTTE has publicized the names of four other cadre -- a "major", two "captains" and a "lieutenant" -- purportedly killed by Karuna's forces while under detention.

16. (SBU) HUMANITARIAN UPDATE: The humanitarian situation in the east continues to improve. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are slowly returning home and UNHCR is in the process of closing down its IDP center. Contacts report that all food rations and non-food items at the center have been distributed. UNICEF is also activating its contingency plan to scale up operations to handle the large number (upwards of 150) child combatants who were released in the east on April 11 (see Reftels). This is the largest single release ever of former LTTE child soldiers. Additionally, UNICEF is attempting to locate and process another 100 children who reportedly deserted Karuna's ranks in recent days. Combined, these two releases represent one quarter of the number of child soldiers estimated to be in the LTTE's ranks. With these releases, the LTTE has stated, through TamilNet, that all child combatants in the Batticaloa-Ampara districts have now been released. There are other reports that another batch of child soldiers from the Trincomalee District may be released in coming days, bringing the total number of released child soldiers to somewhere around 350-500, but the exact figure is not confirmed as of yet.

17. (C) COMMENT: At this point, the LTTE, in ousting Karuna, seems to be well on its way to reasserting full control in Tamil areas in the east, thus ending the greatest internal threat it has faced as an organization in years. The LTTE's military and political operation to displace Karuna was impressive, serving to reinforce the organization's efficient and fierce image. Thus far, the group seems to be treading carefully with respect to revenge attacks on former Karuna elements in the east. To the LTTE, however, revenge is a dish best served cold, so such attacks could take place well down the line. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD